



Erasure and Resistance in the Memory of the Keezhvenmani Massacre

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Abstract— *The Keezhvenmani massacre of 1968 stands as a tragic testament to the brutal intersection of caste and class oppression in rural Tamil Nadu, where 44 Dalit agricultural labourers, including children, were burned alive during a wage protest. This paper explores the dual processes of erasure and resistance surrounding the massacre's memory, focusing on how mainstream media and official narratives systematically silenced or diluted the caste-based nature of the violence. Early reportage framed the incident as a mere labour dispute or law-and-order issue, omitting crucial caste dimensions and thus perpetuating the invisibility of Dalit suffering. In contrast, this study highlights how oral histories, folk songs, and street theatre have preserved the subaltern voices of survivors and their communities, embodying a form of Dalit aesthetics that reclaims memory through storytelling and cultural expression. By analyzing archival news coverage alongside these grassroots narratives, the paper demonstrates how the Keezhvenmani tragedy was erased from dominant public consciousness but survived and continues to inspire resistance through cultural memory. This case study underscores the importance of recognizing oral histories and artistic expression as powerful tools for marginalized communities to contest erasure and assert their identity and agency. Ultimately, the paper argues that the Keezhvenmani massacre is not only a historical event but also a living memory that challenges us to confront ongoing caste injustices and the politics of representation in media and culture.*



Keywords— *Dalit, Oppression, Media, Representation, Oral Histories.*

I. INTRODUCTION

On the night of December 25, 1968, in a small village called Keezhvenmani in Tamil Nadu's Thanjavur district, 44 Dalit agricultural labourers—men, women, and children—were locked inside a hut and burned alive. Their only “crime” was to demand fair wages and dignity in a paddy-rich region where landowners had long profit from their labour. The massacre shocked India, yet in the months and years that followed, the event began to disappear from the public imagination. Newspapers framed it as a wage dispute, courts dismissed much of the evidence, and official memory treated it as an isolated tragedy rather than as a symptom of caste and class oppression. This paper examines Keezhvenmani not only as a historical injustice but as a living memory that reveals two parallel processes: erasure and resistance. On one hand, dominant institutions

such as media, courts, political discourse muted the caste dimensions of the violence. On the other, Dalit communities, activists, and cultural workers preserved the memory through oral histories, songs, theatre, and later cinema. This study argues that Keezhvenmani lives on precisely because of these acts of remembrance, which embody a form of Dalit aesthetics where art, memory, and resistance are inseparable.

II. ERASURE IN MAINSTREAM NARRATIVES

When Keezhvenmani entered the headlines in 1968, the coverage was striking for what it left unsaid. Many Tamil newspapers avoided naming caste directly. Instead, they described the massacre as a “law and order

problem” or a “labour dispute” caused by Communist agitation (Pandian, 2007). This framing erased the caste-based humiliation and violence that underpinned the conflict. It suggested that Dalit labourers were misled, not that they were asserting their rights. The judicial response reinforced this erasure. Though landlords and their men were initially arrested, higher courts later acquitted most of the accused, citing “lack of evidence” (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998). For survivors, the acquittals were devastating. Families who had watched loved ones burn alive found the state unwilling to name the crime for what it was: caste violence against Dalits asserting their dignity. The silencing here was double—first in the media, and then in the law. This process reflects what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) describes in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*—when the voices of the oppressed are filtered, distorted, or entirely omitted by dominant systems of knowledge. Keezhvenmani, in mainstream telling, was not about Dalit assertion but about disorder, not about structural oppression but about unfortunate unrest.

III. ORAL HISTORIES AS RESISTANCE

Silence in dominant archives did not mean silence in the village. Survivors and their communities carried Keezhvenmani forward through oral histories. Women sang *oppari* (laments/elegy) naming the victims, folk artists told the story through street plays, and activists recorded testimonies that circulated in pamphlets and local meetings. These accounts emphasized what the media refused to acknowledge: that Dalits were demanding fair wages, that their assertion provoked the landlords’ fury, and that caste was inseparable from class in this agrarian society (Guha, 1982). One villager’s testimony, recorded years later, recalled how mothers clutched their children as the flames rose around them. Such stories, carried in memory and song, gave the tragedy a human texture absent in newspaper reports. They resisted the reduction of Keezhvenmani to “disorder” and insisted on naming the landlords’ caste arrogance and cruelty. Oral histories thus became what Ranajit Guha calls the “subaltern archive”—a way for marginalized communities to preserve their truths outside official records (Guha, 1982). They also illustrate what Dalit writer Sharankumar Limbale (2004) terms Dalit aesthetics: art rooted not in elite ideals of beauty but in the urgency of lived experience and the ethics of truth-telling. In this sense, every folk song about Keezhvenmani is not only memory but resistance.

IV. DALIT AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL MEMORY

Over the decades, Keezhvenmani has remained alive in Tamil cultural memory, especially through art and literature. Plays like *Maniyamma* depicted the massacre with unflinching honesty, ensuring that rural audiences would not forget. Political activists held annual commemorations at the village, where songs and street theatre retold the story. In cinema, direct references to Keezhvenmani were absent for years. The Tamil film industry, dominated by upper-caste producers and directors, often avoided such raw depictions of caste violence. Yet few filmmakers and allies have reclaimed the story indirectly. Mari Selvaraj’s *“Karnan”* (2021), for instance, draws inspiration from Keezhvenmani and other caste atrocities. Its scenes of burning huts and police repression echo the collective trauma of 1968, translating oral history into cinematic language. Similarly, Pa. Ranjith’s work in films like *“Kaala”* (2018) and his archival initiatives through ‘*Neelam Panpaatu Maiyam*’ seek to document Dalit struggles, ensuring they are not erased from cultural memory. Here, Dalit aesthetics manifests in the choice of symbols—burning huts, mourning songs, and resistant bodies—that insist on remembering what the state and mainstream media tried to forget. As Limbale (2004) argues, the value of Dalit art lies not in polished form but in its capacity to speak truth, to disturb, and to resist.

Erasure vs. Resistance: A Continuing Tension

Keezhvenmani thus represents an ongoing struggle between erasure and resistance. On one side are the forces of silence: official archives, court verdicts, media framings that downplay caste. On the other side are voices that refuse to be silenced: villagers singing laments, activists staging plays, filmmakers embedding memory in their work. This tension illustrates a broader reality: caste violence in India is often erased in public discourse, yet it survives in subaltern memory. The key question is not whether the subaltern can speak—as Spivak (1988) provocatively asked—but whether dominant structures are willing to listen. Keezhvenmani shows that the subaltern does speak: in song, in testimony, in film. It is the mainstream that too often turns away.

V. CONCLUSION

The Keezhvenmani massacre is more than a tragic past; it is a continuing challenge to how we remember and whose voices we honor. Its official erasure reveals the mechanisms by which caste violence is normalized, while its survival in oral histories and Dalit aesthetics shows the resilience of subaltern memory. Remembering Keezhvenmani is not just an act of mourning but an act of

resistance. To tell the story today is to confront not only the injustice of 1968 but also the persistence of caste oppression in India. Keezhvenmani teaches us that history is not neutral: it is contested, and in that contest, the voices of the marginalized must be heard, preserved, and amplified. In every lament sung, in every play performed, in every film frame that echoes burning huts, Keezhvenmani refuses to be erased.

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